

Barriers to Effective Discipling ⁱ

By Bob Young

Discipling: A Definition

Considering the state of the contemporary church, there is little doubt that there is a great need for Christians to be disciplined. When I use the word “disciple” in the verb form, “to disciple,” I am reflecting the basic meaning of the word: teaching and learning. A disciple is a learner. Discipling is a process that focuses on the teaching that is necessary to help Christ-followers develop as genuine disciples of Jesus. That is, the specific teaching that helps people learn how to be a disciple of Jesus.

The early church was involved in evangelism, discipleship, sharing with other believers, worship, and ministry. The progression is natural. “They persevered in teaching and learning the teachings of the apostles, fellowship, breaking bread and praying” (Acts 2:42). They cared for one another (Acts 2:45). This description of the first disciples tells us what they did; it also tells us that they did it continually and sacrificially. They grew in fruitfulness and maturity.

Addressing a Great Need

New Christians need to learn how to be committed followers of Jesus. Jesus described the process of making disciples as baptizing and teaching (Matt. 28:18-20). New Christians need additional teaching that is specifically focused on completing their understanding of the teaching of Scripture – what is sometimes described as “didache” or “kerygma.” Many versions of the Bible translate the Greek word for teaching as doctrine.

Many who have been Christians for a while have quit growing spiritually. Their spiritual life today is not much different than it was several years ago. They need encouragement toward continued spiritual growth.

All Christians need to experience personal care. Most could benefit from relationships with other Christians that are specifically designed to nurture every believer toward maturity and fruitfulness.

Discipling Begins with the Spiritual Leaders

The Bible places the first responsibility for discipling squarely on the shoulders of leaders—evangelists, elders and pastors, and teachers (Ephesians 4:12-16). Yet very few church leaders today have a well-defined, active plan for discipling the members God has placed in their charge. Few church leaders are actively discipling others. Many church leaders do not have a plan for preparing and involving every member in the ministry of the church. Many church members believe that their role is limited to attending worship. How unlike the early church! All of the members in the early church were involved in learning and teaching—evangelism and discipling, sharing with others, worship, and service.

A Brief History Lesson and Twelve Problem Areas

Why do church leaders and churches struggle with effective discipling? How could churches improve? This article addresses twelve potential problem areas. But first, we should acknowledge a lesson from our recent history.

Discipling relationships were abused in the past.

During the height the popularity of the discipling movement in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, some leaders had an unhealthy influence over their people. Some groups became like cults. Some disciplers were possessive, demanding, and controlling of those they disciplined. At times, personal faith and individuality were repressed for the sake of the group. While some believers found security in such relationships, many rebelled and left, often with deep hurts. All Christians need close friendships within the body of believers; they also need friendships with non-Christians so that the Good News can be shared.

Discipleship is not built into the DNA of many local churches

Discipleship is not set up as an expectation. The expectation of maturity and fruitfulness is not present. Maturity requires learning, spiritual growth, spiritual discipline, commitment, and sacrifice. Fruitfulness requires learning, sharing faith, talking.

Contemporary culture works against transparent, vulnerable relationships

People live in closed, protected environments and are not ready for open vulnerability. Discipling is relational. People must be taught and be willing to learn how to establish close, meaningful, transparent relationships in Christ.

The culture has developed a consumer attitude toward church and religion and the church has bought into the cultural view

Most people come to church expecting to receive rather than to give. The church has bought into the consumerism of the culture so that most church efforts and the work of the church staff is focused on developing good programs that will make the church attractational—preaching, music, children’s program, youth program. Often, the church continues the attractational approach through a host of “ministries” that have little or nothing to do with the biblical mandates of Jesus. Jesus’ words, “teaching them to observe all I have commanded,” are lost in the midst of multiplied ministries that do good but are not “Christian-specific.”¹

The church functions and looks like a secular organization

This point expands the last sentence in the previous paragraph. How much of what is done in the church is uniquely Christian? Many times, the public prayers at church say the same things that are said in public prayers at Lion’s Club, Kiwanis, Rotary, or other gatherings—gratitude for the day, weather, physical blessings. Less frequently mentioned are salvation, forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, strength. (To further develop this point is beyond the intent of this article—suffice it to say that discipleship is difficult when the church is more organization than body.)

People, including many Christians, do not want others to interfere with their personal lives

People are jealous of their privacy. They want a spiritual experience without seeking spiritual maturity. They want to follow Jesus without commitment and sacrifice. They want to remain anonymous. Many Christians live a double life, looking good at church while struggling with problems and discouragements no one in church knows.

The church has encouraged a version of “openness” that does not depend on discipling relationships

In a cultural context where many church members are hesitant to open up about the deepest parts of their lives, the church often substitutes superficial prayer requests for genuine transparency. This allows people to feel that they are involved in relationships with other disciples without establishing close personal ties.

Many church leaders are not willing to invest the time and commitment that discipling requires

Leaders must commit to discipling and must persevere, investing the necessary time to establish close personal ties. The battle for souls is worth the time investment and the development of shared soul-experiences, especially in prayer together, will also deepen relationship with God.

Discipling requires devoting large chunks of time to know others personally and minister to their needs. It requires costly, often painful, long-term commitment to the body of believers. Even though such commitment is a key feature of New Testament Christianity, Christians in today’s fast-moving society are often reluctant to

¹ “Christian specific” refers to activities that would only be undertaken by Christians, for example, evangelism, Bible teaching, prayers for the lost, eternal concerns. Activities that are not “Christian specific” are those activities that are often done by secular organizations and non-Christians, e.g. benevolence, medical care, child care, drug rehabilitation, resources for the homeless, etc. Even prayers may not be “Christian specific” if they mostly mention beautiful days, weather, and general themes that many non-Christians pray about.

commit. Leaders must make finding time to meet with, minister to, and mentor individuals a priority. That is difficult considering how busy most of us are. But it is something we church leaders must commit to do.

Discipling can be frustrating

Discipling is a long process. Even after a person is baptized, that person may fall away and we may be powerless in our efforts to mature the new Christian. New Christians will make mistakes. Those who have been Christians a long time will resist change and renewed commitment.

Discipling is spiritually taxing

Discipling is a battle for souls. Discipling is emotionally draining. Some Christians, and even church leaders, do not have the spiritual energy, fortitude, capacity to make and mature others. Discipling is also spiritually refreshing. The battle for souls deepens our relationship with God.

Discipling requires training

To become an effective discipler—both in sharing the Good News and in helping others toward spiritual maturity—requires training. Few churches offer training to help members know how to share the Good News, and to encourage and support other Christians in their spiritual development. Many Christians find a renewed commitment to discipling when they are taught “best practices” for successful discipling.

Effective discipling in a local church requires planning

One of the pitfalls of effective discipling is that some who need support and mentoring “fall through the cracks.” Without careful planning, it is true that disciplers may concentrate on a few and neglect others. Church leaders and Christians who commit to discipling certain persons will spend more time with those they are discipling than they do with others. Discipling that matures a Christian is the natural result of the process of making disciples. But, eventually, individual discipling must become the work of the church so that more disciples can be made and matured.

Jesus demonstrates the necessary balance in his ministry. He spent time with three special disciples, he spent time with all of his disciples. He cared for many of those he met. He had special relationships as with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. He cared for many while giving special attention to the Twelve, and especially to Peter, James and John.

Effective discipling is intentional

The church, and especially church leaders, must find renewed commitment to make sure that everyone is personally cared for. The best way to do that is by training people to share the task. That is what happens in a church that intentionally gives itself to discipling.

¹ Credit to Ajith Fernando for a few germ thoughts that I have included in this article